

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# Stories of African-American Veterinary History

By Dr. Donald F. Smith

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Stories of African-American veterinarians and the history of their education has been a major topic on this site in the past year. Based on feedback I have received from individuals and institutions, I am confident it has had a positive impact and served as an inspiration to those who want to become veterinarians, as well as those who have spent their entire professional lives as veterinarians.

Here is a listing and brief overview of the stories that have appeared here in recent months.

### **Stories about the early education of African-American veterinarians (pre 1950)**

*"African-American Veterinary Students at Kansas State University: 1910-1950" (Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine, June 2, 2013)*

Co-authored with Kansas State historian Dr. Howard Erickson, this is a story of the extraordinary impact that Kansas State University had on the education of African-Americans before Tuskegee established its veterinary college. Dr. Erickson explains why the university was committed to educating these 22 veterinarians -- approximately one-third of all African-Americans who received DVMs during that time period.

*"A Veterinary Student's Contribution to the History of African-American DVM Education" (Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine, February 6, 2014)*

While a second-year veterinary student, Dr. Jennifer Morrissey (Cornell DVM, 2013) researched and wrote the story of eight African-American Cornell veterinary students who graduated between 1912 and 1918. It is a remarkable contribution to African-American veterinary history as she identified some individuals who had not been recognized previously and told their stories using primary source material. Her research helped emphasize the fact that we don't know as much about the early history of veterinary medicine as we sometimes think, and that interested and committed students have the capacity to help remedy that deficit.

### **Stories about Tuskegee University School of Veterinary Medicine**

*"A Tribute to Tuskegee" (Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine, January 17, 2014)*

This story follows the history of Tuskegee from its founding in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Booker T. Washington, to the establishment of the veterinary college by President Frederick Douglass Patterson, to the current program under the leadership of Dean Tsegaye Habtemariam. Several noted alumni are highlighted for their significant contributions to veterinary medicine.



*Tsegaye Habtemariam, DVM, PhD, MPVM  
Dean, College of Veterinary Medicine, Nursing and Allied Health  
Tuskegee University  
(Photo available from Tuskegee University)*

**“Frederick Douglass Patterson and Tuskegee University’s School of Veterinary Medicine”**  
*(Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine, May 14, 2013)*

This is my tribute to a man so remarkable that I consider him to be one of the three most influential US veterinarians of all time, the other two being the French-born Alexandre Liautard and the Scot, James Law. Born in 1901 and orphaned as an infant, F.D. Patterson was educated at the Ohio State University (DVM) and Cornell University (PhD) before becoming the third president of Tuskegee Institute. He used that position not only to establish the School of Veterinary Medicine during segregation, but he was also the leading force behind the founding (in 1946) of the United Negro College Fund.

**“Tuskegee and Cornell’s Shared Legacy in Graduate Education”** *(Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine, August 20, 2013)*

The need for some of Tuskegee’s veterinary faculty to get advanced degrees in the basic science disciplines represented a critical step in the development of their educational and academic program. During the 1960s, this need was met through an informal agreement with Cornell University, built upon the professional relationship and personal friendship of the deans at the time, W.A. Hagen (Cornell) and T.S. Williams (Tuskegee).

### **Stories about individual early African-American Veterinarians**

**“The Robinsons: Father and Son African-American Veterinarians”** *(Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine, January 29, 2014)*

Aubrey Robinson Sr. received his DVM in 1920, capping off a decade that saw eight other African-Americans graduate from Cornell. He established a highly-successful general practice in northern New Jersey and sent all of his children to college. His three sons attended Cornell, one becoming a federal judge, one an engineer, and the third, Charles, a veterinarian. Charles Robinson continued the practice started by his father and also served briefly as one of the early faculty in the new veterinary school at Tuskegee.



Dr. Aubrey E. Robinson, 1920, Graduation Photo      Dr. Charles R. Robinson, 1944, Graduation Photo  
(© New York State Veterinary College, Cornell University)

*“Dr. Daniel Skelton: The Story of a 1930s-educated African American Veterinarian”*  
(*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, May 26, 2013)

A graduate of LeMoyne College in Memphis, Tennessee, Dan Skelton arrived in New York City in summer 1935 with a goal of attending Cornell. On the third try, and with the assistance of his mentor and advocate, the Harvard-educated president of LeMoyne, he was admitted and become the decade’s only African-American DVM graduate from Cornell. This is a heart-warming story of a man who was well-liked and supported by his depression-era classmates.

### **Contemporary Stories Promoting Diversity for African-American Veterinarians**

*“Dr. Ronnie G. Elmore takes Diversity to another level at Kansas State University”*  
(*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, June 30, 2013)

For many years, Associate Dean Ronnie Elmore has lived out his commitment to promoting diversity and inclusion at Kansas State University. In 2013, he was presented by his peers with the prestigious Iverson Bell Recognition Award, a well-deserved honor.

*“A Tuskegee Graduate to Lead the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association”*  
(*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, February 10, 2014)

Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne (Tuskegee DVM, 1982) is president-elect of the Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association. She owns an animal hospital in Bloomfield, Connecticut, and serves on the Board of Trustees of the University of Connecticut, her undergraduate *alma mater*. She recently visited Cornell to participate in the inaugural women's veterinary leadership symposium for DVM students.



*Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne with Jack*  
(Photo provided by Dr. Andrea Dennis-LaVigne, 2014)

**KEYWORDS:**

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Frederick Douglass Patterson  
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Andrea Dennis-LaVigne  
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Connecticut Veterinary Medical Association  
Iverson Bell Recognition Award  
Daniel Skelton  
Aubrey Robinson, Sr  
Charles Robinson

Jennifer Morrissey  
Howard H. Erickson

TOPIC:

African American Veterinarians

LEADING QUESTION:

What African American veterinarian is considered one of the most influential educators in the United States? Answer, Frederick Douglass Patterson.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.